

*Administration of Barack Obama, 2014*

**Remarks at the White House Tribal Nations Conference**

*December 3, 2014*

*The President.* Hello, everybody! *Kahee.* Well, thank you so much. Everybody, please have a seat, please have a seat.

*Audience member.* Love you!

*The President.* Love you back. [*Laughter*] It's good to see you.

*Audience member.* We love you, man!

*The President.* Thank you.

*Audience member.* Love you more! [*Laughter*]

*The President.* Well, welcome to the 2014 White House Tribal Nations Conference. Five years ago, when we held this meeting for the first time, it was historic, the largest-ever gathering of tribal leaders at the White House. And we got some valuable work done. So we thought, hey, this is a pretty good idea, let's do this again. And now we're meeting for the sixth time. This conference has become an institution.

And I want to thank every tribal leader here for making that happen, especially those of you who come year after year, committed to making our nation-to-nation relationship as strong as it can be.

I also want to thank the Members of Congress who are here today. I want to thank Sally Jewell, our outstanding Secretary of Interior. Sally is also the Chair of the White House Council on Native American Affairs. And I'm proud to have Native Americans serving with dedication and skill in my administration, including somebody I love, Jodi Gillette of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. Everybody here knows Jodi, my Special Assistant for Native American Affairs, as well as Raina Thiele, who is Denaina and Yup'ik and works in the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs.

If I could, I'd give a shout-out to every nation here today. Each is a unique and cherished part of our American community. To all of my adopted Crow brothers and sisters, *hine wabeh itchik*. It is a good day. [*Laughter*]

*Grand Jury Decision in Death of Eric Garner in New York City*

I hope you'll allow me this indulgence before I get started talking about what we have accomplished and what we still have to accomplish, because one of the things about being President is, news breaks, and it's important for people to hear how I feel and how I'm thinking about some important issues that we face in this Nation.

Some of you may have heard there was a decision that came out today by a grand jury not to indict police officers who had interacted with an individual named Eric Garner, in New York City, all of which was caught on videotape and speaks to the larger issues that we've been talking about now for the last week, the last month, the last year, and sadly, for decades, and that is, the concern on the part of too many minority communities that law enforcement is not working with them and dealing with them in a fair way.

And there's going to be, I'm sure, additional statements by law enforcement. My tradition is not to remark on cases where there may still be an investigation. But I want everybody to understand that this week, in the wake of Ferguson, we initiated a Task Force whose job it is to come back to me with specific recommendations about how we strengthen the relationship between law enforcement and communities of color and minority communities that feel that bias is taking place; that we are going to take specific steps to improve the training and the work with State and local governments when it comes to policing in communities of color; that we are going to be scrupulous in investigating cases where we are concerned about the impartiality and accountability that's taking place.

And as I said when I met with folks both from Ferguson and law enforcement and clergy and civil rights activists, I said this is an issue that we've been dealing with for too long, and it's time for us to make more progress than we've made. And I'm not interested in talk, I'm interested in action. And I am absolutely committed as President of the United States to making sure that we have a country in which everybody believes in the core principle that we are equal under the law.

So I just got off the phone with my Attorney General, Eric Holder. He will have more specific comments about the case in New York. But I want everybody to know here, as well as everybody who may be viewing my remarks here today, we are not going to let up until we see a strengthening of the trust and a strengthening of the accountability that exists between our communities and our law enforcement.

And I say that as somebody who believes that law enforcement has an incredibly difficult job; that every man or woman in uniform are putting their lives at risk to protect us; that they have the right to come home, just like we do from our jobs; that there's real crime out there that they've got to tackle day in and day out; but that they're only going to be able to do their job effectively if everybody has confidence in the system.

And right now, unfortunately, we are seeing too many instances where people just do not have confidence that folks are being treated fairly. And in some cases, those may be misperceptions, but in some cases, that's a reality. And it is incumbent upon all of us, as Americans, regardless of race, region, faith, that we recognize this is an American problem, and not just a Black problem or a Brown problem or a Native American problem. This is an American problem. When anybody in this country is not being treated equally under the law, that's a problem. And it's my job as President to help solve it. *[Applause]* All right?

### *Relations Between Tribal Nations and the Federal Government*

Now, when I visited the Crow Nation in Montana, I was a candidate for this office, and I made it a point to meet with tribal leaders on the campaign trail as often as I could, because I wanted to make sure our country did better by our First Americans. Talk was cheap, and there had been too many promises that hadn't been kept. And I tried to make sure that I didn't overpromise. I had tried to make clear to the leaders that I met with that I wasn't going to be able singlehandedly to reverse hundreds of years of history, but what I could do is listen and learn and partner with you.

I wanted to change the relationship between our governments, to elevate your voices in Washington and give your tribes greater say over the decisions that affect the lives of your people every day. And I wanted to turn the page on a history that is riddled with too many broken promises, write a new chapter with a spirit of respect and trust. And today, more than 6 years later, I'm proud of everything that we've done to make that happen.

Together, we've strengthened your sovereignty: giving more power to tribal courts and police, restoring hundreds of thousands of acres of tribal trust lands. We've expanded opportunity: permanently reauthorizing the Indian Health Care Improvement Act, speeding up the process for businesses signing leases in Indian Country, building roads, expanding high-speed Internet access, and moving forward on renewable energy projects. We've delivered justice: resolving legal disputes that had dragged on for decades, untying your hands when it comes to dealing with domestic violence.

So as I said earlier, as I said on the campaign trail, we haven't solved every problem, but I've been able to keep a promise to all of you that I would learn and I would listen and I'd treat you with the respect that you deserve. And we have more work to do, but when we—*[applause]*. We have more work to do, but when we step back, we see there's virtually no area in which we haven't made significant progress together. We can take pride in that.

And I made another promise that I'd visit Indian Country as President. And this June, I kept that promise. I know that the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe is here. Where are you all? So Michelle and I traveled to their reservation in North Dakota. It was a day I'll never forget. We attended the annual Cannon Ball Flag Day powwow. *[Laughter]* Students were singing Lakota national—the Lakota national anthem. There was a drum group that performed a veterans' song as American flags flew in the breeze—and it was breezy. It did make me think about, I'm glad I was there during the summer. *[Laughter]* But this drum group was honoring a tribal citizen who served in our—each was honoring a tribal member who had served in our military. People of all ages wore the traditional regalia with pride. And it was clear how deeply this nation values its culture and its history. And it was clear how deeply they cared for each other, especially their young people.

And so it was arranged for me to meet with some of these young people. And Michelle and I, before the powwow, sat down with a group of Lakota young adults. There was no press, no teachers, no parents. It was just us. And folks were invited to say whatever was on their minds. And these young people could not have been more poised, and they could not have been more thoughtful. And they talked about their families and their friends and their dreams of the future. But they also talked about the pain in their hearts and the obstacles they had had to overcome and the problems they had seen with loved ones who had been brought down by drugs or alcohol or violence or poverty.

One young man was raising his four little brothers by himself. All of them knew somebody that they loved who had attempted suicide, committed suicide, died in a car accident before their time. Some of them had spent time living in a bus. And there were tears in that room pretty much the entire conversation and the sense that schools weren't always preparing them properly and that they weren't sure about the possibilities of a better future.

And Michelle and I were honored that these young people opened up to us. But more importantly, we were moved because they were like Malia and Sasha, just as smart, just as hopeful, just as beautiful. But at their core, there was a nagging doubt that they would have the opportunities that my daughters had. And nothing gets me more frustrated than when I hear that. Nothing gets me angrier than when I get a sense that our young people early in life are already feeling like opportunities are foreclosed to them, because that's not who we are.

And so Michelle and I ended up staying longer than we had planned, and we got a lot of hugs in, and we walked away shaken because they—some of these kids were carrying burdens no young person should ever have to carry. And it was heartbreaking. And we told them, because they were such extraordinary young people—strong and talented and courageous—we

said, you've got to believe in yourselves, because we believe in you. And we want to give those young people and young Native Americans like them the support they deserve. We have to invest in them and believe in them and love them. And if we do, there's no question of the great things they can achieve, not just for their own families, but for their nation and for the United States.

And the truth is those young people were representative of young people in every tribe, in every reservation in America. And too many face the same struggles that those Lakota teenagers face. They're not sure that this country has a place for them. Every single one of them deserves better than they're getting right now. They are our children, and they deserve the chance to achieve their dreams.

So when Michelle and I got back to the White House after our visit to Standing Rock, I told my staff—I brought Sally in, and I brought Arne Duncan in, and I brought whoever else was involved in youth and education and opportunity and job training, and I said, you will find new avenues of opportunity for our Native youth. You will make sure that this happens on my watch.

And as I spoke, they knew I was serious because it's not very often where I tear up in the Oval Office. I deal with a lot of bad stuff in this job. It is not very often where I get choked up, so they knew I was serious about this.

And so here is what I want you to know that we're working on as a consequence of these conversations. Number one, today we're releasing a report on the unique challenges that Native youth face, because we cannot solve these challenges without a comprehensive picture of the problem.

Number two, I'm instructing every member of my Cabinet to experience what Michelle and I did at Standing Rock: to sit down with Native young people and hear firsthand about their lives. Sally Jewell has already done it. Arne Duncan—have already started. I want everybody to do it.

And the Department of Education has launched a new initiative with a handful of tribes called the Native Youth Community Projects. And the idea is, we're working with tribes to give schools and students intensive support across a range of areas, from nutrition to mental health, to culturally relevant curriculum. We know that learning about the history and language and traditions of one's people can make a huge difference in a child's education. And in the long run, if it's done right, it will help more of them be prepared for college and careers. We want to help make that happen.

Number three, to cultivate the next generation of Native leaders, we're creating a national network called Generations Indigenous to remove the barriers that stand between young people and opportunity. And the first class of Gen-I Youth Ambassadors are here today. We are launching a new National Tribal Youth Network to connect and support talented young people in your nations. And next year, we will hold the first White House Tribal Youth Gathering. It will look a lot like this conference, only younger. *[Laughter]* That's all right; you see my gray hair. I can't say nothing about that. *[Laughter]*

Number four, the budget I submit to Congress in February will include smarter, stronger investments in several areas that are really important to Native youth, especially education. We're going to invest in connecting tribal schools to high-speed Internet. We're going to fill them with the best teachers and principals. We're going to make sure that children and families

get the support they need to stay secure and healthy. And we are going to keep fighting to meet our obligations to your nations.

We're going to fight to reauthorize the Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Act, because every young person deserves a safe place to live. We're going to keep promoting economic growth in Indian Country, because every young person deserves the chance to work and get ahead.

We're going to keep working with your communities to deal with the very real impacts of climate change. And I want to thank the tribal leaders who have advised me on how to do that as members of my Task Force on Climate Preparedness and Resilience.

I also want to recognize those tribes that have done exceptional work in their response to climate change, including two that we named Climate Action Champions this morning: the Blue Lake Rancheria Tribe and the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians. And we're going to keep working with all of you to protect your natural resources and restore tribal homelands, resolve disputes over water rights, to make sure your sacred lands are protected for future generations.

The United States shares a sacred bond with our Native nations. We have a sacred responsibility to all our young people, including Native youth. Every day that I have the honor to serve as your President, I will do everything I can to meet that responsibility and honor that trust and to do right by your nations and your children and future generations.

And—[*applause*]. Which brings me back to what I said at the beginning: Because too many promises haven't been kept, I've tried not to overpromise. But when I've made a promise, I've tried to make sure that I meet that commitment. So when Michelle and I said goodbye to those teenagers in Standing Rock, we told them we wanted to return their hospitality, and we asked them to come visit us at the White House. And a bunch of them told us later they didn't think they were ever going to hear from us again. [*Laughter*] Because they said, you know what, we've had a lot of adults make promises to us that didn't get kept. Well, 2 weeks ago, they came by, and we took them out for pizza. [*Laughter*] And they got a tour of the White House. And they met with officials from across my administration. And everybody here who had a chance to meet them said how terrific they were.

And I understand that on their last night in Washington, their hotel had a blackout, and sitting together in their pajamas in the dark, they did what I understand was a very Lakota thing to do. They wrote a song about their trip. And so I'm going to just go over what the song says. It—here's how it went. [*Laughter*] I'm not going to sing it though. [*Laughter*]

*Audience members.* Sing!

*The President.* And I'm sure it sounds better in Lakota. [*Laughter*]

It says: "We returned from the White House. We knew without a doubt we were the first of many voices of Indian Country. So if you hear this song, listen and learn it to sing along. We are all one family. Let's not make this just a dream."

We're all one family. [*Applause*] We're all one family. Your nations have made extraordinary contributions to this country. Your children represent the best of this country and its future. Together, we can make sure that every Native young person is treated like a valuable member not only of your nation, but of the American family; that every Native young person gets an equal shot at the American Dream.

That's what I'm working for. That's what you're working for. I'm proud every single day to be your partner. "We are all one family. Let's not make this just a dream."

Thank you. God bless you. God bless the United States of America. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:38 p.m. in the Capital Hilton hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Raina Thiele, Associate Director, White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs and Public Engagement; and Eric Garner, who died during an attempted arrest by New York City police officers on July 17.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : White House Tribal Nations Conference.

*Locations:* Washington, DC.

*Names:* Duncan, Arne; Garner, Eric; Gillette, Jodi Archambault; Holder, Eric H., Jr.; Jewell, Sarah M.R. "Sally"; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Thiele, Raina.

*Subjects:* American Indians and Alaska Natives : Economic growth and development; American Indians and Alaska Natives : Education system, improvement efforts; American Indians and Alaska Natives : Land trust and property rights, strengthening efforts; American Indians and Alaska Natives : Tribal nations, relations with Federal Government; American Indians and Alaska Natives : White House Tribal Nations Conference; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Service and dedication; Civil rights : Minorities :: Relations with police; Education, Department of : Secretary; Environment : Climate change; Interior, Department of the : Secretary; Justice, Department of : Attorney General; Law enforcement and crime : Law enforcement officers, service and dedication; Law enforcement and crime:21st-Century Policing, President's Task Force on; Missouri : Civil unrest in Ferguson; New York : New York City :: Death of Eric Garner; White House Office : Assistants to the President :: Intergovernmental Affairs, Associate Director; White House Office : Assistants to the President :: Native American Affairs, Senior Policy Adviser.

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